

Ice Cream and Tears

by Valeria Boriak

Exhausted, I passed through customs towards the exit door and stepped into a new world. My father gave my still sleepy brother and me a stick of Wrigley's peppermint gum and we experienced our first taste in our new life. Every trip back home has matured me in many ways. Every flight I reflect back on my life, time after time, and become anxious of what I was going to face coming home to Russia. Often what I was looking forward to did not happen the way I wished. Now, events that I was planning for when I would come back to our new home in the United States began to be more reliable. Coming back to Russia I especially looked forward to seeing my grandparents. I was even more excited about seeing my friends with whom I could finally share my experiences with while I was away from them, living my new life. Every time, however, this excitement was diminished by more of my friends moving away or changing their lifestyles to become too different from me. I was becoming more isolated from both worlds. I vividly remember crowds of foreign people staring at me as I walked through the isle with our cart full of luggage. As we put away our five suitcases I was still unable to grasp the idea that I was in America. Everything looked surreal; even the air I breathed had a peculiar scent. Nowhere where I had traveled throughout Russia was the air like this, humid and warm yet crisp.

As we got into the car, my father's American friend began asking us questions; I did not hear them. My eager young mind was not only incapable of understanding them because of the language barrier but I was unable to comprehend anything that was said. I was numb to everything around me. Every time I go back to Russia I become increasingly disappointed with the life people live there. The divide between the rich and the poor is becoming so great that it seems there will never be a middle class again. More poor are becoming homeless due to the government withholding their salaries and the rich are becoming as wealthy as the majority in the Western World because they may take advantage of the foreign investments and markets. What saddens me the most, however, is the effect on the Russian children. My latest experience utterly abashed me. As we were driving from the airport I looked out the car window; it had just rained. I was amazed by the roomy cars, wide lanes, and clean black roads. I thought they were clean enough to walk on in white socks. Riding in the brand new Cadillac I felt like a privileged authority. I had never ridden in a car so luxurious. It was the month of December and except for the wind there were no signs of winter. No one wearing heavy coats or hats. No snow. Clean cars. Clean roads.

At the city festival, celebrated every year, my friends and I encountered three youngsters savoring a couple bottles of vodka. They were a ten-year-old boy, a fourteen-year-old boy, and a girl about twelve years old. The scene was as follows: the three youngsters were gathered in a circle. The ten-year-old boy was urging the fourteen-year-old to open one of the two bottles and take another shot. What he did not realize is that the boy was at the point when he was unable to regurgitate or pass out. I quickly realized that, as I myself have been in a similar situation, took both of the bottles away and smashed them against a nearby building. After this I told the girl to get the almost dying boy some water and take the boy home.

The same day we arrived we visited the White House and the Capital lawns. What I previously saw on television was no longer oceans away it was right beneath me feet. After a short tour of the Mall we were back in the car and I settled back into my meditation. I was numb to the reality that I would never see my friends again. I had my family sitting next to me, my brother, just three, my mother, and my father. My father had the happiest smile on his face. Finally, he had his family by his side. My mother, on the other hand, had a deep thoughtful look. Unlike me, being nine years old, she was old enough to comprehend what she would face. At that point it made me question my life and what I would have

become if we had not moved. More so, this situation encouraged me to pursue my interests in international affairs, so that one day I would be able to stop this nonsense. After all, isn't the reason for which millions come to America is to make a difference? Or so I was taught all through my school education.

My mother was very quiet, like I've never seen her before. I did not know why. My numb feelings were turning into excitement as our American friend showed us into his home. A house! Back home everyone lived in apartments with a single television set showing few selected channels. I turned down an offer of playing with new toys that I've always wished for when I was still living in Kazakhstan. Now that I was in America I did not care as much for the Barbie dolls and cute stuffed animals; instead, I began flipping through over 120 channels. Watching commercials of toys come alive, my brother and I were overwhelmed with the boldness of colors all around us.

After an unusually dull spaghetti dinner, I experienced the best tasting ice cream of my life: Breyer's Vanilla Bean with colored dot sprinkles. That became my favorite ice cream ever since.

Finally, my first day of school came in the new world. As I entered Mrs. Wilson's third grade class, everyone stared at me. I stared back. I felt a rush of embarrassment which never happened to me back home. I was always the most outgoing, confident, stylish girl everywhere I went and now as I looked at everyone, for the first time, I felt belittled. Everyone began asking me questions as the teacher put me in front of the classroom, and I did not understand what they wanted from me. I saw a couple of girls whispering and that embarrassed me even more. Others tried to comfort me but no one could, not even my Russian-English dictionary, which did not help explain any of the expressions that were said to me. I put it away and sat quietly waiting for the longest day of my life to end. When everyone left to go home I was still trying to copy down the assignments. For the first time, I would not be the smartest in the class anymore, since I didn't even understand what the assignment was asking for. At the end of my first school day I sat crying. This is when my river was born. Since that day I will never be able to regain the same level of confidence. The following week we moved to our new home in North Carolina. It seemed rather empty with only a Christmas tree and a rocking chair on the first floor. That mattered little, it was a two-story house! All ours to live in. Our parents room was downstairs and my brother and I would get the second floor all to ourselves. The house even had two kitchens. As few days passed my excitement began to die down and I began missing my friends back home. Nevertheless, discovering new places and people kept me occupied.

My mother lays in bed, not talking, not moving, hardly breathing. My father is not here; there is only my toddler brother, who does not comprehend our mother's illness. What do I do? Who should I call? My mother is delirious. I am only nine. She is asking me to call our grandmother. I cannot do that. I tell her she went to the store. I have never seen my mother this ill before. Later we would find out more about her illness, but at that time I did not know. This was the first and one of many times when I would have to nurture my mother like she took care of me when I was sick. The only difference was she would never get better. After we moved to America she settled into a very long state of depression that still haunts her today.

The first time we went grocery shopping I was stunned by the variety of products the store carried. I especially remember the amazing selection of ice cream. All sizes, all flavors, all types, anything a nine year old could ever wish for. We finally settled on the biggest one, the 5-gallon bucket of Neapolitan ice cream.

We were saying goodbyes to our crying grandparents as we were parting for life. Never again will they be able to understand us. My mother knew, as tears ran down her cheeks. A new river was born that would only keep swelling with tears as she would never again be able to spend every day with her mother like she used to.

Eventually, I began to get used to our new life, but never again would I ever be a child. I felt like an outcast. My parents did not understand the life that everyone else lived, the customs, the styles, not even the language. From age nine, I was not only their translator and mentor, their link to the world, but also needed to be my own mentor. No one would ever understand me and I knew that. As the Russian saying goes, "the melon is growing but its stem is shriveling." I was growing up but my childhood was becoming more distant from my grasp, never for me to experience it. I looked at my third grade teacher and classmates gathering around tables filled with sweets. Everyone is so excited about me going to America. No one in the classroom has ever traveled to another country because most were too poor, let alone moving to live in America. Many people only dreamed of going to the land of opportunities and I was moving there. What they didn't realize was that they were lucky in other ways. They would grow up together and grow close as friends as I never would. For the first several summers I went back to visit my grandmother, every time, I made more friends only to leave them behind at the end of the summer. As a natural reaction I did not want to go back to where I had no friends except for my pesky little brother. I found comfort in my Russian friends, or so I thought at that time. However, every summer I returned my experience of living in the United States distanced me from them. I was all alone. Many times I wished I was still in Russia growing close to friends like they have. Many times I thought of how happy I would be having a best friend, which I wouldn't have until my sophomore year of high school. I understood that my parents wanted what was best for us, but I still strongly believed that I would have had a good life even if we stayed in Russia, maybe even better.

"Today the world changes so quickly that in growing up we take leave not just of youth but of the world we were young in.... Fear and resentment of what is new is really a lament for the memories of our childhood" (Medawar). I was filled with resentment as I isolated myself from the new peers around me and cried myself to sleep for several weeks at a time after coming back from my summer vacations, wishing things were back like they were when I was still at home, in Russia.

After living in the United States for a few months we received our green card. To many it simply means that they receive their legal right to live in America, but to me it meant more. I now understand what receiving the green card or alien residence card really means. The green card gave me the right of way to be in this world, to learn, to live. The alien card would prove that from that moment on I would never feel at home anywhere. In my ten years living in the United States I have experienced more than some people would wish for. I have gone from a normal childhood, to being a cane my mother could lean on, to once again becoming accepted as a "normal" person. Living in North Carolina for three years was the hardest experience of my journey especially because we were the only foreign family in our town and being isolated, as a child, was extremely difficult. However, after moving to Virginia with its wide diversity of immigrants, I began my journey anew and adapted to the new surroundings. Eventually I found a set path through which I now travel towards a higher education and someday being able to make a difference. After all, maybe moving to America was the right thing and I should take advantage of my background and put it to good use rather than block myself out from anything foreign and unknown like my mother has.